

DA 506
.B9 L6
Copy 1



EDMUND BURKE

BY

DR. JOHN LORD

BY TRANSLATOR

AUG 30 1871

*A Specimen Lecture from the Completed Edition of Dr. Lord's
"Beacon Lights of History"*



JAMES CLARKE & COMPANY

Publishers: 3, 5 and 7 WEST 22D STREET, NEW YORK

30-79

31

DA506
B9L6

These pages will give you an idea of just how interesting the "Beacon Lights" lectures are. The paper and presswork are the same as appear in the volumes themselves.

EDMUND BURKE.

POLITICAL MORALITY.

IT would be difficult to select an example of a more lofty and irreproachable character among the great statesmen of England than Edmund Burke. He is not a puzzle, like Oliver Cromwell, although there are inconsistencies in the opinions he advanced from time to time. He takes very much the same place in the parliamentary history of his country as Cicero took in the Roman senate. Like that greatest of Roman orators and statesmen, Burke was upright, conscientious, conservative, religious, and profound. Like him, he lifted up his earnest voice against corruption in the government, against great state criminals, against demagogues, against rash innovations. Whatever diverse opinions may exist as to his political philosophy, there is only one opinion as to his character, which commands universal respect. Although he was the most conservative of statesmen, clinging to the Constitution, and to consecrated traditions and associations both in Church and

State, still his name is associated with the most important and salutary reforms which England made for half a century. He seems to have been sent to instruct and guide legislators in a venal and corrupt age. To my mind Burke looms up, after the lapse of a century, as a prodigy of thought and knowledge, devoted to the good of his country; an unselfish and disinterested patriot, as wise and sagacious as he was honest; a sage whose moral wisdom shines brighter and brighter, since it was based on the immutable principles of justice and morality. One can extract more profound and striking epigrams from his speeches and writings than from any prose writer that England has produced, if we except Francis Bacon. And these writings and speeches are still valued as among the most precious legacies of former generations; they form a thesaurus of political wisdom which statesmen can never exhaust. Burke has left an example which all statesmen will do well to follow. He was not a popular favorite, like Fox and Pitt; he was not born to greatness, like North and Newcastle; he was not liked by the king or the nobility; he was generally in the ranks of the opposition; he was a new man, like Cicero, in an aristocratic age,—yet he conquered by his genius the proudest prejudices; he fought his way upward, inch by inch; he was the founder of a new national policy, although it was bitterly opposed; and he died universally venerated for

Source unknown

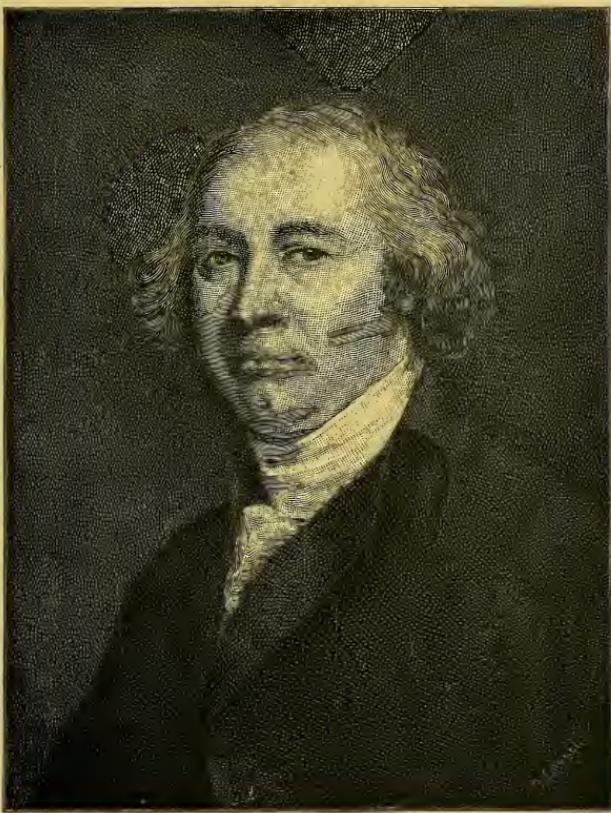
Source unknown

his integrity, wisdom, and foresight. He was the most remarkable man, on the whole, who has taken part in public affairs, from the Revolution to our times. Of course, the life and principles of so great a man are a study. If history has any interest or value, it is to show the influence of such a man on his own age and the ages which have succeeded, — to point out his contribution to civilization.

Edmund Burke was born, 1730, of respectable parents in Ireland. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where he made a fair proficiency, but did not give promise of those rare powers which he afterwards exhibited. He was no prodigy, like Cicero, Pitt, and Macaulay. He early saw that his native country presented no adequate field for him, and turned his steps to London at the age of twenty, where he entered as a student of law in the Inner Temple, — since the Bar was then, what it was at Rome, what it still is in modern capitals, the usual resort of ambitious young men. But Burke did not like the law as a profession, and early dropped the study of it; not because he failed in industry, for he was the most plodding of students; not because he was deficient in the gift of speech, for he was a born orator; not because his mind repelled severe logical deductions, for he was the most philosophical of the great orators of his day, — not be-

cause the law was not a noble field for the exercise of the highest faculties of the mind, but probably because he was won by the superior fascinations of literature and philosophy. Bacon could unite the study of divine philosophy with professional labors as a lawyer, also with the duties of a legislator; but the instances are rare where men have united three distinct spheres, and gained equal distinction in all. Cicero did, and Bacon, and Lord Brougham; but not Erskine, nor Pitt, nor Canning. Even two spheres are as much as most distinguished men have filled,—the law with politics, like Thurlow and Webster; or politics with literature, like Gladstone and Disraeli. Dr. Johnson, Garrick, and Reynolds, the early friends of Burke, filled only one sphere.

The early literary life of Burke was signalized by his essay on “The Sublime and Beautiful,” original in its design and execution, a model of philosophical criticism, extorting the highest praises from Dugald Stewart and the Abbé Raynal, and attracting so much attention that it speedily became a text-book in the universities. Fortunately he was able to pursue literature, with the aid of a small patrimony (about £300 a year), without being doomed to the hard privations of Johnson, or the humiliating shifts of Goldsmith. He lived independently of patronage from the great,—the bitterest trial of the literati of the eighteenth century, which drove



After the painting by J. Barry, Dublin National Gallery
EDMUND BURKE

Cowper mad, and sent Rousseau to attics and solitudes, — so that in his humble but pleasant home, with his young wife, with whom he lived amicably, he could see his friends, the great men of the age, and bestow an unostentatious charity, and maintain his literary rank and social respectability.

I have sometimes wondered why Burke did not pursue this quiet and beautiful life, — free from the turmoils of public contest, with leisure, and friends, and Nature, and truth, — and prepare treatises which would have been immortal, for he was equal to anything he attempted. But such was not to be. He was needed in the House of Commons, then composed chiefly of fox-hunting squires and younger sons of nobles (a body as ignorant as it was aristocratic), — the representatives not of the people but of the landed proprietors, intent on aggrandizing their families at the expense of the nation, — and of fortunate merchants, manufacturers, and capitalists, in love with monopolies. Such an assembly needed at that day a schoolmaster, a teacher in the principles of political economy and political wisdom; a leader in reforming disgraceful abuses; a lecturer on public duties and public wrongs; a patriot who had other views than spoils and place; a man who saw the right, and was determined to uphold it whatever the number or power of his opponents. So Edmund Burke was sent among them, — ambitious

doubtless, stern, intellectually proud, incorruptible, independent, not disdainful of honors and influence, but eager to render public services.

It has been the great ambition of Englishmen since the Revolution to enter Parliament, not merely for political influence, but also for social position. Only rich men, or members of great families, have found it easy to do so. To such men a pecuniary compensation is a small affair. Hence, members of Parliament have willingly served without pay, which custom has kept poor men of ability from aspiring to the position. It was not easy, even for such a man as Burke, to gain admission into this aristocratic assembly. He did not belong to a great family; he was only a man of genius, learning, and character. The squirearchy of that age cared no more for literary fame than the Roman aristocracy did for a poet or an actor. So Burke, ambitious and able as he was, must bide his time.

His first step in a political career was as private secretary to Gerard Hamilton, who was famous for having made but one speech, and who was chief secretary to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Halifax. Burke soon resigned his situation in disgust, since he was not willing to be a mere political tool. But his singular abilities had attracted the attention of the prime-minister, Lord Rockingham, who made him

his private secretary, and secured his entrance into Parliament. Lord Verney, for a seat in the privy council, was induced to give him a “rotten borough.”

Burke entered the House of Commons in 1765, at thirty-five years of age. He began his public life when the nation was ruled by the great Whig families, whose ancestors had fought the battles of reform in the times of Charles and James. This party had held power for seventy years, had forgotten the principles of the Revolution, and had become venal and selfish, dividing among its chiefs the spoils of office. It had become as absolute and unscrupulous as the old kings whom it had once dethroned. It was an oligarchy of a few powerful Whig noblemen, whose rule was supreme in England. Burke joined this party, but afterwards deserted it, or rather broke it up, when he perceived its arbitrary character, and its disregard of the fundamental principles of the Constitution. He was able to do this after its unsuccessful attempt to coerce the American colonies.

American difficulties were the great issue of that day. The majority of the Parliament, both Lords and Commons,—sustained by King George III., one of the most narrow-minded, obstinate, and stupid princes who ever reigned in England; who believed in an absolute jurisdiction over the colonies as an integral part of the empire, and was bent not only in enforcing this juris-

diction, but also resorted to the most offensive and impolitic measures to accomplish it,— this omnipotent Parliament, fancying it had a right to tax America without her consent, without a representation even, was resolved to carry out the abstract rights of a supreme governing power, both in order to assert its prerogative and to please certain classes in England who wished relief from the burden of taxation. And because Parliament had this power, it would use it, against the dictates of expediency and the instincts of common-sense; yea, in defiance of the great elemental truth in government that even thrones rest on the affections of the people. Blinded and infatuated with notions of prerogative, it would not even learn lessons from that conquered country which for five hundred years it had vainly attempted to coerce, and which it could finally govern only by a recognition of its rights.

Now, the great career of Burke began by opposing the leading opinions of his day in reference to the coercion of the American colonies. He discarded all theories and abstract rights. He would not even discuss the subject whether Parliament had a right to tax the colonies. He took the side of expediency and common-sense. It was enough for him that it was foolish and irritating to attempt to exercise abstract powers which could not be carried out. He foresaw and he predicted the consequences of attempting to coerce such a people as the

Americans with the forces which England could command. He pointed out the infatuation of the ministers of the crown, then led by Lord North. His speech against the Boston Port Bill was one of the most brilliant specimens of oratory ever displayed in the House of Commons. He did not encourage the colonies in rebellion, but pointed out the course they would surely pursue if the irritating measures of the Government were not withdrawn. He advocated conciliation, the withdrawal of theoretic rights, the repeal of obnoxious taxes, the removal of restrictions on American industry, the withdrawal of monopolies and of ungenerous distinctions. He would bind the two countries together by a cord of love. When some member remarked that it was horrible for children to rebel against their parents, Burke replied: "It is true the Americans are our children; but when children ask for bread, shall we give them a stone?" For ten years he labored with successive administrations to procure reconciliation. He spoke nearly every day. He appealed to reason, to justice, to common-sense. But every speech he made was a battle with ignorance and prejudice. "If you must employ your strength," said he indignantly, "employ it to uphold some honorable right. I do not enter upon metaphysical distinctions,—I hate the very name of them. Nobody can be argued into slavery. If you cannot reconcile your sovereignty with their free-

dom, the colonists will cast your sovereignty in your face. It is not enough that a statesman means well; duty demands that what is right should not only be made known, but be made prevalent,—that what is evil should not only be detected, but be defeated. Do not dream that your register, your bonds, your affidavits, your instructions, are the things which hold together the great texture of the mysterious whole. These dead instruments do not make a government. It is the spirit that pervades and vivifies an empire which infuses that obedience without which your army would be a base rabble and your navy nothing but rotten timber.” Such is a fair specimen of his eloquence,—earnest, practical, to the point, yet appealing to exalted sentiments and pervaded with moral wisdom; the result of learning as well as the dictate of a generous and enlightened policy. When reason failed, he resorted to sarcasm and mockery. “Because,” said he, “we have a right to tax America we must do it; risk everything, forfeit everything, take into consideration nothing but our right. O infatuated ministers! Like a silly man, full of his prerogative over the beasts of the field, who says, there is wool on the back of a wolf, and therefore he must be sheared. What! shear a wolf? Yes. But have you considered the trouble? Oh, I have considered nothing but my right. A wolf is an animal that has wool; all animals that have

wool are to be sheared ; and therefore I will shear the wolf."

But I need not enlarge on his noble efforts to prevent a war with the colonies. They were all in vain. You cannot reason with infatuation,— *Quem deus vult perdere, prius dementat*. The logic of events at last showed the wisdom of Burke and the folly of the king and his ministers, and of the nation at large. The disasters and the humiliation which attended the American war compelled the ministry to resign, and the Marquis of Rockingham became prime-minister in 1782, and Burke, the acknowledged leader of his party, became paymaster of the forces,— an office at one time worth £25,000 a year, before the reform which Burke had instigated. But this great statesman was not admitted to the cabinet ; George III. did not like him, and his connections were not sufficiently powerful to overcome the royal objection. In our times he would have been rewarded with a seat on the treasury bench ; with less talents than he had, the commoners of our day become prime-ministers. But Burke did not long enjoy even the office of paymaster. On the death of Lord Rockingham, a few months after he had formed the ministry, Burke retired from the only office he ever held. And he retired to Beaconsfield,— an estate which he had purchased with the assistance of his friend Rockingham, where he lived when parliamentary duties per-

mitted, in that state of blended elegance, leisure, and study which is to be found, in the greatest perfection, in England alone.

The political power of Burke culminated at the close of the war with America, but not his political influence: and there is a great difference between power and influence. Nor do we read that Burke, after this, headed the opposition. That position was shared by Charles James Fox, who ultimately supplanted his master as the leader of his party; not because Burke declined in wisdom or energy, but because Fox had more skill as a debater, more popular sympathies, and more influential friends. Burke, like Gladstone, was too stern, too irritable, too imperious, too intellectually proud, perhaps too unyielding, to control such an ignorant, prejudiced, and aristocratic body as the House of Commons, jealous of his ascendancy and writhing under his rebukes. It must have been galling to the great philosopher to yield the palm to lesser men; but such has ever been the destiny of genius, except in crises of public danger. Of all things that politicians hate is the domination of a man who will not stoop to flatter, who cannot be bribed, and who will be certain to expose vices and wrongs. The world will not bear rebukes. The fate of prophets is to be stoned. A stern moral greatness is repulsive to the weak and wicked. Parties reward mediocre men, whom they can

use or bend ; and the greatest benefactors lose their popularity when they oppose the enthusiasm of new ideas, or become austere in their instructions. Thus the greatest statesman that this country has produced since Alexander Hamilton, lost his prestige when his conciliating policy became offensive to a rising party whose watchword was "the higher law," although, by his various conflicts with Southern leaders and his loyalty to the Constitution, he educated the people to sustain the very war which he foresaw and dreaded. And had that accomplished senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, who succeeded to Webster's seat, and who in his personal appearance and advocacy for reform strikingly resembled Burke,—had he remained uninjured to our day, with increasing intellectual powers and profounder moral wisdom, I doubt whether even he would have had much influence with our present legislators ; for he had all the intellectual defects of both Burke and Webster, and never was so popular as either of them at one period of their career, while he certainly was inferior to both in native force, experience, and attainments.

The chief labors of Burke for the first ten years of his parliamentary life had been mainly in connection with American affairs, and which the result proved he comprehended better than any man in England. Those of the next ten years were directed principally to Indian

difficulties, in which he showed the same minuteness of knowledge, the same grasp of intellect, the same moral wisdom, the same good sense, and the same regard for justice, that he had shown concerning the colonies. But in discussing Indian affairs his eloquence takes a loftier flight ; he is less conciliating, more in earnest, more concerned with the principles of immutable obligations. He abhors the cruelties and tyranny inflicted on India by Clive and Hastings. He could see no good from an aggrandizement purchased by injustice and wrong. If it was criminal for an individual to cheat and steal, it was equally atrocious for a nation to plunder and oppress another nation, infidel or pagan, white or black. A righteous anger burned in the breast of Burke as he reflected on the wrongs and miseries of the natives of India. Why should that ancient country be ruled for no other purpose than to enrich the younger sons of a grasping aristocracy and the servants of an insatiable and unscrupulous Company whose monopoly of spoils was the scandal of the age ? If ever a reform was imperative in the government of a colony, it was surely in India, where the government was irresponsible. The English courts of justice there were more terrible to the natives than the very wrongs they pretended to redress. The customs and laws and moral ideas of the conquered country were spurned and ignored by the greedy scions

of gentility who were sent to rule a population ten times larger than that between the Humber and the Thames.

So Burke, after the most careful study of the condition of India, lifted up his voice against the iniquities which were winked at by Parliament. But his fierce protest arrayed against him all the parties that indorsed these wrongs, or who were benefited by them. I need not dwell on his protracted labors for ten years in behalf of right, without the sympathies of those who had formerly supported him. No speeches were ever made in the English House of Commons which equalled, in eloquence and power, those he made on the Nabob of Arcot's debts and the impeachment of Warren Hastings. In these famous philippics, he fearlessly exposed the peculations, the misrule, the oppression, and the inhuman heartlessness of the Company's servants,—speeches which extorted admiration, while they humiliated and chastised. I need not describe the nine years' prosecution of a great criminal, and the escape of Hastings, more guilty and more fortunate than Verres, from the punishment he merited, through legal technicalities, the apathy of men in power, the private influence of the throne, and the sympathies which fashion excited in his behalf,—and, more than all, because of the undoubted service he had rendered to his country, if it *was* a service to extend her rule by questionable

means to the farthermost limits of the globe. I need not speak of the obloquy which Burke incurred from the press, which teemed with pamphlets and books and articles to undermine his great authority, all in the interests of venal and powerful monopolists. Nor did he escape the wrath of the electors of Bristol,—a narrow-minded town of India traders and Negro dealers,—who withdrew from him their support. He had been solicited, in the midst of his former éclat, to represent this town, rather than the “rotten borough” of Wendover; and he proudly accepted the honor, and was the idol of his constituents until he presumed to disregard their instructions in matters of which he considered they were incompetent to judge. His famous letter to the electors, in which he refutes and ridicules their claim to instruct him, as the shoemakers of Lynn wished to instruct Daniel Webster, is a model of irony, as well as a dignified rebuke of all ignorant constituencies, and a lofty exposition of the duties of a statesman rather than of a politician.

He had also incurred the displeasure of the Bristol electors by his manly defence of the rights of the Irish Catholics, who since the conquest of William III. had been subjected to the most unjust and annoying treatment that ever disgraced a Protestant government. The injustices under which Ireland groaned were nearly as repulsive as the cruelties inflicted upon the

Protestants of France during the reign of Louis XIV. "On the suppression of the rebellion under Tyrconnel," says Morley, "nearly the whole of the land was confiscated, the peasants were made beggars and outlaws, the Penal Laws against Catholics were enforced, and the peasants were prostrate in despair." Even in 1765 "the native Irish were regarded by their Protestant oppressors with exactly that combination of intense contempt and loathing, rage and terror, which his American counterpart would have divided between the Indian and the Negro." Not the least of the labors of Burke was to bring to the attention of the nation the wrongs inflicted on the Irish, and the impossibility of ruling a people who had such just grounds for discontent. "His letter upon the propriety of admitting the Catholics to the elective franchise is one of the wisest of all his productions,—so enlightened is its idea of toleration, so sagacious is its comprehension of political exigencies." He did not live to see his ideas carried out, but he was among the first to prepare the way for Catholic emancipation in later times.

But a greater subject than colonial rights, or Indian wrongs, or persecution of the Irish Catholics agitated the mind of Burke, to which he devoted the energies of his declining years; and this was, the agitation growing out of the French Revolution. When that "roaring conflagration of anarchies" broke out, he was in the

full maturity of his power and his fame,—a wise old statesman, versed in the lessons of human experience, who detested sophistries and abstract theories and violent reforms; a man who while he loved liberty more than any political leader of his day, loathed the crimes committed in its name, and who was sceptical of any reforms which could not be carried on without a wanton destruction of the foundations of society itself. He was also a Christian who planted himself on the certitudes of religious faith, and was shocked by the flippant and shallow infidelity which passed current for progress and improvement. Next to the infidel spirit which would make Christianity and a corrupted church identical, as seen in the mockeries of Voltaire, and would destroy both under the guise of hatred of superstition, he despised those sentimentalities with which Rousseau and his admirers would veil their disgusting immoralities. To him hypocrisy and infidelity, under whatever name they were baptized by the new apostles of human rights, were mischievous and revolting. And as an experienced statesman he held in contempt the inexperience of the Revolutionary leaders, and the unscrupulous means they pursued to accomplish even desirable ends.

No man more than Burke admitted the necessity of even radical reforms, but he would have accomplished them without bloodshed and cruelties. He would not

have removed undeniable evils by introducing still greater ones. He regarded the remedies proposed by the Revolutionary quacks as worse than the disease which they professed to cure. No man knew better than he the corruptions of the Catholic church in France, and the persecuting intolerance which that church had stimulated there ever since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes,—an intolerance so cruel that to be married unless in accordance with Catholic usage was to live in concubinage, and to be suspected of Calvinism was punishable by imprisonment or the galleys. But because the established church was corrupt and intolerant, he did not see the necessity for the entire and wholesale confiscation of its lands and possessions (which had not been given originally by the nation, but were the bequests of individuals), thereby giving a vital wound to all the rights of property which civilization in all countries has held sacred and inviolable. Burke knew that the Bourbon absolute monarchy was oppressive and tyrannical, extravagant and indifferent to the welfare of the people; but he would not get rid of it by cutting off the head of the king, especially when Louis was willing to make great concessions: he would have limited his power, or driven him into exile as the English punished James II. He knew that the nobles abused their privileges; he would have taken them away rather than attempt

to annul their order, and decimate them by horrid butcheries. He did not deny the necessity of reforms so searching that they would be almost tantamount to revolution ; but he would not violate both constitutional forms and usages, and every principle of justice and humanity, in order to effect them.

To Burke's mind, the measures of the revolutionists were all mixed up with impieties, sophistries, absurdities, and blasphemies, to say nothing of cruelties and murders. What good could grow out of such an evil tree ? Could men who ignored all duties be the expounders of rights ? What structure could last, when its foundation was laid on the sands of hypocrisy, injustice, ignorance, and inexperience ? What sympathy could such a man as Burke have for atheistic theories, or a social progress which scorned the only conditions by which society can be kept together ? The advanced men who inaugurated the Reign of Terror were to him either fools, or fanatics, or assassins. He did not object to the meeting of the States-General to examine into the intolerable grievances, and, if necessary, to strip the king of tyrannical powers, for such a thing the English parliament had done ; but it was quite another thing for *one branch* of the States-General to constitute itself the nation, and usurp the powers and functions of the other two branches ; to sweep away, almost in a single night, the constitution of the realm ;

to take away all the powers of the king, imprison him, mock him, insult him, and execute him, and then to cut off the heads of the nobles who supported him, and of all people who defended him, even women themselves, and convert the whole land into a Pandemonium ! What contempt must he have had for legislators who killed their king, decimated their nobles, robbed their clergy, swept away all social distinctions, abolished the rites of religion,— all symbols, honors, and privileges ; all that was ancient, all that was venerable, all that was poetic, even to abbey churches ; yea, dug up the very bones of ancient monarchs from the consecrated vaults where they had reposed for centuries, and scattered them to the winds ; and then amid the mad saturnalia of sacrilege, barbarity, and blasphemy to proclaim the reign of “Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality,” with Marat for their leader, and Danton for their orator, and Robespierre for their high-priest ; and, finally, to consummate the infamous farce of reform by openly setting up a wanton woman as the idol of their worship, under the name of the Goddess of Reason !

But while Burke saw only one side of these atrocities, he did not close his eyes to the necessity for reforms. Had he been a Frenchman, he would strenuously have lifted up his voice to secure them, but in a legal and constitutional manner,— not by violence, not by disregarding the principles of justice and morality to secure

a desirable end. He was one of the few statesmen then living who would not do evil that good might come. He was no Jesuit. There is a class of politicians who would have acted differently ; and this class, in his day, was made up of extreme and radical people, with infidel sympathies. With this class he was no favorite, and never can be. Conservative people judge him by a higher standard ; they shared at the time in his sympathies and prejudices.

Even in America the excesses of the Revolution excited general abhorrence ; much more so in England. And it was these excesses, this mode of securing reform, not reform itself, which excited Burke's detestation. Who can wonder at this ? Those who accept crimes as a necessary outbreak of revolutionary passions adopt a philosophy which would veil the world with a funeral and diabolical gloom. Reformers must be taught that no reforms achieved by crime are worth the cost. Nor is it just to brand an illustrious man with indifference to great moral and social movements because he would wait, sooner than upturn the very principles on which society is based. And here is the great difficulty in estimating the character and labors of Burke. Because he denounced the French Revolution, some think he was inconsistent with his early principles. Not at all ; it was the crimes and excesses of the Revolution he denounced, not the impulse of

the French people to achieve their liberties. Those crimes and excesses he believed to be inconsistent with an enlightened desire for freedom; but freedom itself, to its utmost limit and application, consistent with law and order, he desired. Is it necessary for mankind to win its greatest boons by going through a sea of anarchies, madness, assassinations, and massacres? Those who take this view of revolution, it seems to me, are neither wise nor learned. If a king makes war on his subjects, they are warranted in taking up arms in their defence, even if the civil war is followed by enormities. Thus the American colonies took up arms against George III.; but they did not begin with crimes. Louis XVI. did not take up arms against his subjects, nor league against them, until they had crippled and imprisoned him. He made even great concessions; he was willing to make still greater to save his crown. But the leaders of the revolution were not content with these, not even with the abolition of feudal privileges; they wanted to subvert the monarchy itself, to abolish the order of nobility, to sweep away even the Church,—not the Catholic establishment only, but the Christian religion also, with all the institutions which time and poetry had consecrated. Their new heaven and new earth was not the reign of the saints, which the millenarians of Cromwell's time prayed for devoutly, but a sort of communistic

equality, where every man could do precisely as he liked, take even his neighbor's property, and annihilate all distinctions of society, all inequalities of condition, — a miserable, fanatical dream, impossible to realize under any form of government which can be conceived. It was this spirit of reckless innovation, promulgated by atheists and drawn logically from some principles of the "Social Contract" of which Rousseau was the author, which excited the ire of Burke. It was license, and not liberty.

And while the bloody and irreligious excesses of the Revolution called out his detestation, the mistakes and incapacity of the new legislators excited his contempt. He condemned a *compulsory* paper currency, — not a paper currency, but a compulsory one, — and predicted bankruptcy. He ridiculed an army without a head, — not the instrument of the executive, but of a military democracy receiving orders from the clubs. He made sport of the legislature ruled by the commune, and made up not of men of experience, but of adventurers, stock-jobbers, directors of assignats, trustees for the sale of church-lands, who "took a constitution in hand as savages would a looking-glass," — a body made up of those courtiers who wished to cut off the head of their king, of those priests who voted religion a nuisance, of those lawyers who called the laws a dead letter, of those philosophers who admitted no argument

but the guillotine, of those sentimentalists who chanted the necessity of more blood, of butchers and bakers and brewers who would exterminate the very people who bought from them.

And the result of all this wickedness and folly on the mind of Burke was the most eloquent and masterly political treatise probably ever written,—a treatise in which there may be found much angry rhetoric and some unsound principles, but which blazes with genius on every page, which coruscates with wit, irony, and invective; scornful and sad doubtless, yet full of moral wisdom; a perfect thesaurus of political truths. I have no words with which to express my admiration for the wisdom and learning and literary excellence of the “Reflections on the French Revolution” as a whole,—so luminous in statement, so accurate in the exposure of sophistries, so full of inspired intuitions, so Christian in its tone. This celebrated work was enough to make any man immortal. It was written and rewritten with the most conscientious care. It appeared in 1790; and so great were its merits, so striking, and yet so profound, that thirty thousand copies were sold in a few weeks. It was soon translated into all the languages of Europe, and was in the hands of all thinking men. It was hailed with especial admiration by Christian and conservative classes, though bitterly denounced by many intelligent people

as gloomy and hostile to progress. But whether liked or disliked, it made a great impression, and contributed to settle public opinion in reference to French affairs. What can be more just and enlightened than such sentiments as these, which represent the spirit of the treatise :—

“ Because liberty is to be classed among the blessings of mankind, am I to felicitate a madman who has escaped from the restraints of his cell ? There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom. Woe be to that country that would madly reject the service of talents and virtues. Nothing is an adequate representation of a State that does not represent its ability as well as property. Men have a right to justice, and the fruits of industry, and the acquisitions of their parents, and the improvement of their offspring, — to instruction in life and consolation in death ; but they have no right to what is unreasonable, and what is not for their benefit. The new professors are so taken up with rights that they have totally forgotten duties ; and without opening one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping those that lead to the heart. Those who attempt by outrage and violence to deprive men of any advantage which they hold under the laws, proclaim war against society. When, I ask, will such truths become obsolete among enlightened people ; and when will they become stale ? ”

But with this fierce protest against the madness and violence of the French Revolution, the wisdom of Burke

and of the English nation ended. The most experienced and sagacious man of his age, with all his wisdom and prescience, could see only one side of the awful political hurricane which he was so eloquent in denouncing. His passions and his prejudices so warped his magnificent intellect, that he could not see the good which was mingled with the evil; that the doctrine of equality, if false when applied to the actual condition of men at their birth, is yet a state to which the institutions of society tend, under the influence of education and religion; that the common brotherhood of man, mocked by the tyrants which feudalism produced, is yet to be drawn from the Sermon on the Mount; that the blood of a plebeian carpenter is as good as that of an aristocratic captain of artillery; that public burdens which bear heavily on the poor should also be shared equally by the rich; that all laws should be abolished which institute unequal privileges; that taxes should be paid by nobles as well as by peasants; that every man should be unfettered in the choice of his calling and profession; that there should be unbounded toleration of religious opinions; that no one should be arbitrarily arrested and confined without trial and proof of crime; that men and women, with due regard to the rights of others, should be permitted to marry whomsoever they please; that, in fact, a total change in the spirit of government, so imperatively needed in France, was

necessary. These were among the great ideas which the reformers advocated, but which they did not know how practically to secure on those principles of justice which they abstractly invoked,— ideas never afterwards lost sight of, in all the changes of government. And it is remarkable that the flagrant evils which the Revolution so ruthlessly swept away have never since been revived, and never can be revived any more than the oracles of Dodona or the bulls of Mediæval Rome ; amid the storms and the whirlwinds and the fearful convulsions and horrid anarchies and wicked passions of a great catastrophe, the imperishable ideas of progress forced their way.

Nor could Burke foresee the ultimate results of the Revolution any more than he would admit the truths which were overshadowed by errors and crimes. Nor, inflamed with rage and scorn, was he wise in the remedies he proposed. Only God can overrule the wrath of man, and cause melodious birth-songs to succeed the agonies of dissolution. Burke saw the absurdity of sophistical theories and impractical equality,— liberty running into license, and license running into crime; he saw pretensions, quackeries, inexperience, folly, and cruelty, and he prophesied what their legitimate effect would be: but he did not see in the Revolution the pent-up indignation and despair of centuries, nor did he hear the voices of hungry and oppressed

millions crying to heaven for vengeance. He did not recognize the chastening hand of God on tyrants and sensualists ; he did not see the arm of retributive justice, more fearful than the daggers of Roman assassins, more stern than the overthrow of Persian hosts, more impressive than the handwriting on the wall of Belshazzar's palace ; nor could he see how creation would succeed destruction amid the burnings of that vast funeral pyre. He foresaw, perhaps, that anarchy would be followed by military despotism ; but he never anticipated a Napoleon Bonaparte, or the military greatness of a nation so recently ground down by Jacobin orators and sentimental executioners. He never dreamed that out of the depths and from the clouds and amid the conflagration there would come a deliverance, at least for a time, in the person of a detested conqueror ; who would restore law, develop industry, secure order, and infuse enthusiasm into a country so nearly ruined, and make that country glorious beyond precedent, until his mad passion for unlimited dominion should arouse insulted nations to form a coalition which even he should not be powerful enough to resist, gradually hemming him round in a king-hunt, until they should at last confine him on a rock in the ocean, to meditate and to die.

Where Burke and the nation he aroused by his eloquence failed in wisdom, was in opposing this revolu-

tionary storm with bayonets. Had he and the leaders of his day confined themselves to rhetoric and arguments, if ever so exaggerated and irritating ; had they allowed the French people to develop their revolution in their own way, as they had the right to do,—then the most dreadful war of modern times, which lasted twenty years, would have been confined within smaller limits. Napoleon would have had no excuse for aggressive warfare ; Pitt would not have died of a broken heart ; large standing armies, the curse of Europe, would not have been deemed so necessary ; the ancient limits of France might have been maintained ; and a policy of development might have been inaugurated, rather than a policy which led to future wars and national humiliation. The gigantic struggles of Napoleon began when France was attacked by foreign nations, fighting for their royalties and feudalities, and aiming to suppress a domestic revolution which was none of their concern, and which they imperfectly understood.

But at this point we must stop, for I tread on ground where only speculation presumes to stand. The time has not come to solve such a mighty problem as the French Revolution, or even the career of Napoleon Bonaparte. We can pronounce on the logical effects of right and wrong,—that violence leads to anarchy, and anarchy to ruin ; but we cannot tell what would have been the destiny of France if the Revolution had not

produced Napoleon, nor what would have been the destiny of England if Napoleon had not been circumvented by the powers of Europe. On such questions we are children ; the solution of them is hidden by the screens of destiny ; we can only speculate. And since we short-sighted mortals cannot tell what will be the ultimate effect of the great agitations of society, whether begun in noble aspirations or in depraved passions, it is enough for us to settle down, with firm convictions, on what we can see,— that crimes, under whatever name they go, are eternally to be reprobated, whatever may be the course they are made to take by Him who rules the universe. It would be difficult to single out any memorable war in this world's history which has not been ultimately overruled for the good of the world, whatever its cause or character,— like the Crusades, the most unfortunate in their immediate effects of all the great wars which nations have madly waged. But this only proves that God is stronger than devils, and that he overrules the wrath of man. “It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.” There is only one standard by which to judge the actions of men; there is only one rule whereby to guide nations or individuals,— and that is, to do right; to act on the principles of immutable justice.

Now, whatever were the defects in the character or

philosophy of Burke, it cannot be denied that this was the law which he attempted to obey, the rule which he taught to his generation. In this light, his life and labors command our admiration, because he *did* uphold the right and condemn the wrong, and was sufficiently clear-headed to see the sophistries which concealed the right and upheld the wrong. That was his peculiar excellence. How loftily his majestic name towers above the other statesmen of his troubled age! Certainly no equal to him, in England, has since appeared, in those things which give permanent fame. The man who has most nearly approached him is Gladstone. If the character of our own Webster had been as reproachless as his intellect was luminous and comprehensive, he might be named in the same category of illustrious men. Like the odor of sanctity, which was once supposed to emanate from a Catholic saint, the halo of Burke's imperishable glory is shed around every consecrated retreat of that land which thus far has been the bulwark of European liberty. The English nation will not let him die; he cannot die in the hearts and memories of man any more than can Socrates or Washington. No nation will be long ungrateful for eminent public services, even if he who rendered them was stained by grave defects; for it is services which make men immortal. Much more will posterity reverence those benefactors whose private lives were in harmony

with their principles, — the Hales, the L'Hôpitals, the Hampdens of the world. To this class Burke undeniably belonged. All writers agree as to his purity of morals, his generous charities, his high social qualities, his genial nature, his love of simple pleasures, his deep affections, his reverence, his Christian life. He was a man of sorrows, it is true, like most profound and contemplative natures, whose labors are not fully appreciated, — like Cicero, Dante, and Michael Angelo. He was doomed, too, like Galileo, to severe domestic misfortunes. He was greatly afflicted by the death of his only son, in whom his pride and hopes were bound up. “I am like one of those old oaks which the late hurricane has scattered about me,” said he. “I am torn up by the roots; I lie prostrate on the earth.” And when care and disease hastened his departure from a world he adorned, his body was followed to the grave by the most illustrious of the great men of the land, and the whole nation mourned as for a brother or a friend.

But it is for his writings and published speeches that he leaves the most enduring fame; and what is most valuable in his writings is his elucidation of fundamental principles in morals and philosophy. And here was his power, — not his originality, for which he was distinguished in an eminent degree; not learning, which amazed his auditors; not sarcasm, of which he

was a master; not wit, with which he brought down the house; not passion, which overwhelmed even such a man as Hastings; not fluency, with every word in the language at his command; not criticism, so searching that no sophistry could escape him; not philosophy, musical as Apollo's lyre,—but *insight* into great principles, the moral force of truth clearly stated and fearlessly defended. This elevated him to a sphere which words and gestures, and the rich music and magnetism of voice and action can never reach, since it touched the heart and the reason and the conscience alike, and produced convictions that nothing can stifle. There were more famous and able men than he, in some respects, in Parliament at the time. Fox surpassed him in debate, Pitt in ready replies and adaptation to the genius of the house, Sheridan in wit, Townsend in parliamentary skill, Mansfield in legal acumen; but no one of these great men was so forcible as Burke in the statement of truths which future statesmen will value. And as he unfolded and applied the imperishable principles of right and wrong, he seemed like an ancient sage bringing down to earth the fire of the divinities he invoked and in which he believed, not to chastise and humiliate, but to guide and inspire.

In recapitulating the services by which Edmund Burke will ultimately be judged, I would say that he had a hand in almost every movement for which his

generation is applauded. He gave an impulse to almost every political discussion which afterwards resulted in beneficent reform. Some call him a croaker, without sympathy for the ideas on which modern progress is based; but he was really one of the great reformers of his day. He lifted up his voice against the slave-trade; he encouraged and lauded the labors of Howard; he supported the just claims of the Catholics; he attempted, though a churchman, to remove the restrictions to which dissenters were subjected; he opposed the cruel laws against insolvent debtors; he sought to soften the asperities of the Penal Code; he labored to abolish the custom of enlisting soldiers for life; he attempted to subvert the dangerous powers exercised by judges in criminal prosecutions for libel; he sought financial reform in various departments of the State; he would have abolished many useless offices in the government; he fearlessly exposed the wrongs of the East India Company; he tried to bring to justice the greatest political criminal of the day; he took the right side of American difficulties, and advocated a policy which would have secured for half a century longer the allegiance of the American colonies, and prevented the division of the British empire; he advocated measures which saved England, possibly, from French subjugation; he threw the rays of his genius over all political discussions; and he left treatises which from his

day to ours have proved a mine of political and moral wisdom, for all whose aim or business it has been to study the principles of law or government. These, truly, were services for which any country should be grateful, and which should justly place Edmund Burke on the list of great benefactors. These constitute a legacy of which all nations should be proud.

AUTHORITIES.

Works and Correspondence of Edmund Burke; *Life and Times of Edmund Burke*, by Macknight (the ablest and fullest yet written); *An Historical Study*, by Morley (very able); *Lives of Burke* by Croly, Prior, and Bisset; *Grenville Papers*; *Parliamentary History*; the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has a full article on Burke; *Massey's History of England*; *Chatham's Correspondence*; *Moore's Life of Sheridan*; also the *Lives of Pitt and Fox*; *Lord Brougham's Sketch of Burke*; *C. W. Dilke's Papers of a Critic*; *Boswell's Life of Johnson*. The most brilliant of Burke's writings, "*Reflections on the French Revolution*," should be read by everybody.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 020 680 603 5

